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# Georgia Southern University Athletics



Eagles 'Grateful' to Open Volleyball Season This Week  
2020 season preview.

Marc Gignac

Women's Volleyball

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**STATESBORO** – While just about everything else surrounding the Georgia Southern volleyball program is in flux, second-year head coach [Chad Willis](#) has made sure the high expectations he has for the Eagles remain consistent.

Georgia Southern is scheduled to play a 16-game conference schedule, starting against Appalachian State Sept. 25, in Hanner Fieldhouse. The Eagles will play series against each of their Sun Belt East Division rivals before all 12 teams advance to the conference tournament in Foley, Alabama, Nov. 18-22. Though there is much out of the control of the student-athletes and coaching staff, their focus remains constant.

"We're focused on having an opportunity to compete and being grateful for that and then, knowing that everybody is going to the conference tournament, on being the team that's playing the most consistent, high-level volleyball come the middle of November," said Willis.

A series style format with two matches in three days coupled with an ongoing pandemic dictates that depth will be a key this season. Despite the shortened spring, the Eagle veterans made improvement in the offseason, and four newcomers are expected to compete for court time. That gives Georgia Southern the kind of depth it will need to take a step forward this season.

"We're really pleased with how our returners came back, especially with the spring being cut short," said Willis. "It's evident that we have a lot more depth at each position group, and given the schedule, I fully anticipate us tapping into that depth."

A truncated spring did not keep Willis and the coaching staff from tweaking the offensive system – something they had planned from the beginning. With some changes in tempo, they hope to maximize the versatility of their personnel to improve the offense.

"The idea is to put more pressure on the blockers on the other side of the net to have to make decisions and allow us to take advantage of matchups that we're going to see," said Willis. "We're going to try to incorporate more movement at the net, and that versatility should open up the court and allow us to manufacture more points offensively."

That also starts with first contact, and serving as well as serve receive have been major points of emphasis for Willis and the staff since they arrived in Statesboro.

"Serving is something we've focused quite a bit on, and it will continue to be a priority as we emphasize first contact in general," said Willis. "In serve receive, I look

for our numbers to significantly improve. We've added more talent and depth to an already experienced first contact position group, which should allow us to be in system more—a crucial component in our offensive scheme."

Defensively, the Eagles were fairly stout, ranking fifth in the Sun Belt in digs and sixth in blocks.

"We return pretty much every defender we have last year and as a team, we dug close to 16 balls a set, which I thought when you talk about year one and getting everybody acclimated to our system was pretty good," said Willis. "This might be one of the strongest defensive groups I have been around."

Below is a look at each position group.

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### Outside Hitters

Juniors [Maddie Bryant](#) and [Haley Fuller](#) return, while [Hannah McGlockton](#) transferred in prior to the spring semester and [Chamblee Russell](#) is a freshman.

Bryant ranked second on the team in kills per set (2.54) and registered double-digit kills in 10 matches and double-figures digs in six contests despite playing through injuries in the second half of the year.

"Maddie is healthy and looking really strong, and I've been impressed with her focus and urgency early on," said Willis. "Coming off a productive offseason and strong preseason, we're looking for her to take a big step forward this year."

Fuller finished with 42 kills and 36 digs in 38 sets and tallied five-plus kills in seven matches. She tallied 23 kills in the Eagles' Blue vs. White scrimmage last Saturday.

"Haley came back in really good shape and has done a lot of positive things and taken some really big swings for us so far this fall so we look for her to contribute as well," said Willis.

McGlockton, a mid-year transfer from Lindenwood University, demonstrated her athleticism in the spring. The junior posted six kills and 14 digs in the scrimmage.

"Hannah is a dynamic pin, who gets on the ball fast," said Willis. "Her athleticism and versatility fit in well with our offense and our ability to score points."

Russell was the 2019 Marietta Daily Journal/Cobb County Player of the Year and Georgia Volleyball Coaches Association Class AAAAAA Co-Player of the Year at Allatoona High School. She posted 10 kills and three blocks in the scrimmage.

"Chamblee hits a heavy ball and is a big arm in our gym," said Willis. "She's shown early on her ability to be an offensive threat and consistent point scorer. We anticipate her being a key contributor to our team's offensive output this year."

### Middles/Right Sides

Four Eagles in the middle/right side position group – [Mya Wilson](#), [Baylor Bumford](#), [Christina Walton](#) and [Lauren Hager](#) - are back, and Willis expects all four to see significant playing time this season.

Wilson finished second on the team with 216 kills and 50 blocks in 97 sets, and the sophomore tallied double-digit kills in 11 contests, including the last three of the season.

"Mya is on a mission," said Willis. "The level of focus and determination she shows consistently have been contagious. Mya has worked hard to establish herself as an emotional leader, and we're excited to see her continue to improve and elevate those around her."

Bumford ranked seventh in the Sun Belt in hitting percentage (.299), and the junior led the Eagles in blocks with 93.

"She played in every set and having that experience will benefit her, and I think the different tempo that we're using helps her out significantly to be able to take some more swings and produce more kills," said Willis.

Walton, a junior, saw action in 14 sets last year and collected six kills and four blocks in the scrimmage.

"Christina continues to make great strides," said Willis. "She's worked hard on and off the court this offseason, and we anticipate utilizing her athleticism and presence at the net both offensively and defensively this year."

Hager missed last season with injuries and has not seen significant playing time since September of 2018. The senior had 11 kills and four blocks in the scrimmage.

"Lauren adds a good deal of experience and savvy to our MRS position group," said Willis. "I also believe her resilience and knowledge as a fourth year have been key in helping some of our younger players."

### Setters

[Madison Brown](#), one of four Eagles to play in all 101 sets, returns for her junior season, and [Abby Strong](#) is coming off an injury that cut short her freshman campaign.

Brown ranked sixth in the Sun Belt Conference in assists (9.14/set), notched 40-plus assists in 11 matches and double-figure digs in eight contests and enters the campaign ranked eighth on the Georgia Southern career assist list.

"Madison is the catalyst for our offense," said Willis. "She consistently puts in the time and work—in and out of the gym—to be the best she can, and we're looking forward to seeing her take a big step forward this year."

Strong just got back on the court in preseason, and the sophomore had 36 assists, a team-high 22 digs and two aces in the scrimmage.

"It's great to see Abby back on the court and in the mix," said Willis. "We're excited to see her improvement as she gets stronger and continues to get quality reps."

### Liberos/Defensive Specialists

[Landon Jones](#), another Eagle who played in all 101 sets, returns along with junior [Nicoleta Meyer](#) and [Meredith Eckard](#).

Jones ranked fifth in the Sun Belt Conference in digs (4.46/set), and the senior registered 20-plus digs six times.

"Landon brings a steady consistency in serve-receive and first contact, which we're going to rely on," said Willis. "I think her experience, coming off last year, alongside her competitive drive as a senior are keys to leading our ball-control group."

Meyer saw action in three matches, and the junior posted five digs and an assist in the scrimmage.

"Nico continues to improve and sets the tone emotionally for our team each day," said Willis. "I've been so impressed with her attitude and effort. It's genuine, consistent and our entire team feeds off it."

Eckard played in 80 sets and tallied 166 digs, 16 assists and 10 aces as a rookie, and the sophomore had 10 digs and two assists in the scrimmage.

"Meredith got some valuable experience last year as a defensive specialist, and we expect her to continue to improve," said Willis. "Meredith really encompasses our pursuit of excellence mantra. She will play a big role in our team's continued progress."

[Rebekah Farthing](#) and [Ainsley Clifford](#) are expected to see playing time as freshman as both bring specific skill sets to the position.

Farthing posted 12 digs and six aces in the scrimmage.

"Rebekah has established herself as a key contributor both in first contact and on the defensive side of the ball," said Willis. "I think she's come in and earned the trust and respect of teammates as a first year, and we're excited about her continued growth."

Clifford tallied 13 digs, five assists and five aces in the scrimmage.

"Ainsley has shown her ability to be a solid defender along with being one of our most consistent servers," said Willis. "She adds quality depth to our ball-control group, and we fully anticipate her being a productive role player this season."

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The series format of the schedule lends itself to a convenient weekly goal as winning each series would give the Eagles a winning league record for the first time since joining the Sun Belt in 2014.

"Let's try to take two of three and take care of home court as much as possible," said Willis. "That would position us well."

The tournament will feature Olympics style pool play as teams will be grouped into four three-team pods based on their finish in the league standings. The winners of each pod advance to the semifinals for a single-elimination tournament from there.

The winner of the tournament will get an automatic bid to the NCAA Volleyball Championship, which the NCAA Division I Council recently voted to move to the spring. It would be yet another issue to deal with, but one the Eagles would gladly tackle. For now, Georgia Southern is focused on the present.

"In a year filled with so much uncertainty and things being out of our control, we're committing ourselves to pursuing excellence—establishing a standard that every day we focus on getting a little bit better and maximizing the opportunities we get so that hopefully by November, we're peaking at the right time heading into the conference tournament," said Willis.

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